WILLIE BROOKS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

AFRO-AMERICANS IN SAN FRANCISCO
PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

Co-sponsored by
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Co-Sponsored by:
The Friends of the San Francisco Public Library, and
The San Francisco African-American Historical and Cultural Society

Project Coordinator: Lynn Bonfield

WILLIE BROOKS

JUNE 19, 1978

At Mr. Brook's house in San Francisco

Interviewer: Jesse Warr III
Transcriber: Mary A. Wells

BEGIN TAPE 1:3

JW: We will start with your birthdate.

WB: November 3, 1908.

JW: And where was your family living when you were born?

WB: New Orleans.

JW: New Orleans? And how did they happen to...When did you come to California?

WB: 1911.

JW: You were three years old?

WB: Yeah.

JW: Why did the family move here?

WB: Well, now let me see, if I can tell it like my father tells it. My father had a great knack for...He used to like to gamble. And he was a contractor in the city of New Orleans. He used to contract these jobs out...digging ditches and sewers. And at this particular time he had gotten a job with the electric company for laying pipe, or laying tubing or something. I think the job paid him around about $2,000 or $4,000. That was his end of it. Now he had to pay off the men. After he had paid the men, he had about $1,800 or $1,900 cash left. And he got in a card game. I think he lost it all. Some sharks got a hold of him and they got him down to about $800. So he decided it was time to leave. So, he got him a job working for

WB: SP [Southern Pacific Railroad] in the kitchen. And he came out here. They stopped in Oakland. Then he came over here and moved to San Francisco. After he was here for a couple of months, he decided to send for my mother. He accumulated enough money to send for my mother and me. So we came out, and we have been here ever since.

JW: So you were an only child at that point?

WB: Yeah, I was the only child.

JW: Did you have other brothers and sisters later on?

WB: No. No. I'm the only one. First and only, one and last.

JW: What was your father's name?

WB: Nathaniel Brooks.

JW: Can you tell me something about him?

WB: Like what?

JW: Where he was born and how he happened to get into the business he was in?

WB: He was born in Louisiana. No, I don't know...at that time they had a lot of little small places. I think he was born in Algiers. Yeah, he said he was born in Algiers. And that's about as far as I can say as far as his birth is concerned.

JW: About what period was this? About how old was he when you came out there to California?

WB: Oh, this is another question I don't know if I can tell it like it is. He'd be in his 30's.

JW: So, he was born somewhere around 1870, not too long after the Civil War.

WB: That's right.

JW: Were his parents born in slavery?

WB: No, I can't say. Let's see...My grandfather, which was his father, was half French and half Negro.

JW: Which half was which?

WB: You mean?

JW: His father or mother was French?

WB: His mother was Negro, his father was French. My grandfather just did know how to speak a little English. He mostly spoke French or that "patois," they call it, or Creole. He mostly spoke that. He lived mostly with a lot of Creoles. So, therefore, he had no occasion to be too familiar with much English. He did know how to speak a little English. Because I remember when he came out to visit with us, which was around 1918 or 1919 or something like that, he could speak a little English. Because I could understand him and I was just a kid then.

JW: Okay, so your great-grandfather was French. He gave birth to your grandfather, and your father was born in Algiers. Did they have any stories about the olden times, the slavery period, or anything like that?

WB: I didn't...I never did really get a chance to talk with my grandfather. Like when I was a kid, I wasn't interested in what he had to say. But I used to listen to my father, you know, tell stories about his youth...when he was a youngster coming up, and how they learned how to swim. They threw him in the river. Of course, he say when they threw him in the river, after they threw him in a couple of times, he learned how to swim. He and his brother used to swim across the Mississippi River. They used to think that that was a great thing.

JW: Were they farmers?

WB: No, my father wasn't a farmer. He...he didn't go in too much for the soil. He mostly went in for working...a laborer, you know... doing plumbing, digging ditches. At that time they didn't have too much. He didn't go in for farming. Let's put it that way. Just a common laborer, I guest that's what you'd say. Because he wasn't educated. And he was well-liked, and what he knew, you know, he got by on his wits.

JW: Wasn't it unusual for a Black man to have a job as a contractor in that period?

WB: Yes, it was. I imagine it was. I don't know too much about what was happening back there, but he was the only man at that time... you see, at that time there weren't too many Blacks...from the way I get it...there weren't too many Blacks who could read and write. And my father could read and write his name, plus could read and write a few other small things. Nothing heavy now, nothing heavy. Then he was lucky enough to get in touch with another friend of his that had a little more on the ball than he did. And between them, they were the only ones who could do the figuring. Because you had to figure by feet and by yards and by inches. And there was a little figuring done, and you had to write the fellows' names down and you had to write the addresses down, because they didn't have no telephones.

WB: They didn't have no phones, but they had to write their addresses ...more or less what you call keeping books...keeping a record of the work job, of the job plan. And he was the only one at that time with the group that was available. The rest of them didn't know nothing, you know.

JW: Did he say anything about the segregation or violence between Blacks and Whites? Did that concern him?

WB: Well, in the area that they lived in, they didn't have that. He didn't seem...they didn't feel, you see, in Louisiana, you have a culture system...you have a racial system. You have Blacks with Blacks; Browns with Browns; half White, half White; White, White; mixed, mixed. And you had two different dialects of Creole: patois and they have Octoroon. Everybody...nobody...Blacks didn't associate with the Browns; the Browns didn't associate with the Blacks. What is it...Creoles and mulattos. Each had their own set. If you went over in the wrong set, they'd put you back in a hurry.

JW: Which set was your father in?

WB: Well, he was...I guess he was lucky. He got around with pretty much any of 'em, because they had to look for him to get hired and to get work. So, he was pretty fortunate. He could get in and out where a lot of 'em couldn't get in and out.

JW: Was he light-skinned?

WB: No. He was a little lighter than I am. Not much. A little lighter. That's all.

JW: He wasn't...he didn't feel all that hemmed in by Jim Crow or that kind of thing? I guess maybe it hadn't developed very much at that point?

WB: No, it was there...definitely there. But he didn't come in contact with it because he didn't associate with, you know...It just didn't bother him, I guess. As far as I know, it didn't.

JW: Let's talk a little bit about your mother. What was her maiden name?

WB: Howard.

JW: And her first name?

WB: Daisy.

JW: Was she born in that area as well?

WB: She was born in that area. But don't ask me where because I don't know. I can't tell you where. In fact, I don't remember.

JW: Was she older or younger than your father?

WB: Oh, she was much younger.

JW: Much younger?

WB: Much younger, yeah, because she was 15 when I was born. So...

JW: Do you know how they happened to meet?

WB: No. I haven't the slightest idea. My father was a pretty busy man when he was a young fellow. He got around quite a bit. So, I don't know.

JW: Anyway, they got out here to California one way or another. Did she happen to talk about her parents at all?

WB: Well, she had a brother. No, she had two brothers...and a sister. She was the youngest of four children. One of her brothers served in World War I, and the other...I don't know what he did. In fact, I never did meet either one of them. But you know, I used to talk to my mother. My mother couldn't read or write at all. I used to have to wirte letters for her, and I used to have, you know, correspond between she and her brothers and her sister. But other than that...

JW: Did any of the other Louisiana relatives move out to California?

WB: Well, in 1925, I made a trip to New Orleans. And my mother brought her brother's daughter out here. And she stayed out here...let's see, she stayed out here until '30, '31. Let's see, from '25 to '31, five or six years, huh? She was out here for six years. Then, I had a cousin...my father's brother's oldest son...he was out here. He lived out here for a while and then he went back. He was backwards and forward, but I'd say the better part of his life he lived out here. He's dead now.

JW: So, there was a real break with the family when you moved to California, in terms of distance. Other people didn't come...

WB: No, no, no, no. I didn't want them outlaws out here. Let 'em all stay back in Louisiana...begging and poor and hungry. Shoot! Let 'em stay there. [Laughter] In fact, I don't know...I have one distant cousin that I met when I was in my last trip last year. A very nice person. She was a school teacher. Don't ask me her name; I forget her name. You have to ask my wife her name. She's the only known [relative] that I know of. But I know that I got two or three other cousins down there. But that's just the way I want them...right down there where they are. But other than that, I know nothing about them. You know, I've seen 'em and I've heard about 'em, but I don't associate with 'em.

JW: Where did your family first live when you first moved out here?

WB: Well, as far as I know, we lived at...we stayed at the Third Baptist Church which was, at that time, on Hyde and Clay. That's where we first stayed.

JW: You mean you stayed at the church?

WB: We stayed in the church...not in the church. I guess it was in the ...what do you call it, the parish?

JW: Yes.

WB: Where the minister had a couple of rooms there, and that's where we stayed. Then we moved from there to Hyde and Vallejo, I think.

JW: Was your father still working for the SP?

WB: No, no, no. He was working for the...he was working for a private stove company. The man that owned it was Sam P. Hamilton. He worked for him.

JW: Was that a White man?

WB: Yes, oh, yes.

JW: What did he do for him? What kind of job was there?

WB: Well, he installed heating equipment, you know, in the homes and stores, wherever they wanted, you know, heating equipment...stoves and furnaces and things of that nature.

JW: Was that a well-paying job?

WB: I wouldn't know. We lived off it. I guess. Of course, my mother was working at the time too. She was doing day's work; not day's work but housework, you know, like a woman goes to work. But she was fortunate. She never did have to stay on the place. She always got a job where she could come home whenever she wanted to. It was in walking distance so she didn't have no problems.

JW: Did she take you with her when she went to these places?

WB: She didn't have to. It wasn't necessary. You see, I was in school. And I wasn't too far from school. You see, we lived around a lot of Italians and Jews, and they took care of each others kids. So, I never did have no problems as far as taking care of me.

JW: So, when you were in, let's say, elementary school, you were living on Vallejo by then?

WB: No. I was living on...well, I'll have to take it back. I'll have to take you back a little bit. We moved from Hyde and Vallejo down as far as I can remember...this has to be as close as can be...to Lombard off of Webster.

JW: In the Marina?

WB: In the Marina, because I remember going to...I remember my father used to leave me at a kindergarten. He used to take me to kindergarten. It was a Catholic kindergarten, and I stayed there until I became of age. Then I went to school, which was right in back of my...right in back of where I lived. In fact, I could jump over the back fence and I was right in the school yard.

JW: What school was that?

WB: Yerba Buena. And I went there for a while. I went there 'til I got in the second grade. Then we moved up on Union...Union between Laguna and Buchanan. Then I went to Sherman.

JW: What was that neighborhood like then?

WB: Well, you can...I wish I had of kept some pictures, I could show you. Well, you see, from Chestnut Street to the Bay was the Fairgrounds. It was the 1915 Fair [Panama Pacific World Exposition]. It was all of that...then from Van Ness Street to the Presidio. Do you know much about the neighborhood? Do you know much about the streets in the area?

JW: Yes.

WB: Well, that was all fairground. Well, after World War I started, they couldn't complete it. You know, different countries couldn't participate so they had to discontinue it. So, they were in the process of tearing it down just when I was in grade school. After they got rid of all of that, that was all sand dunes. There was nothing but sand dunes out there, from Van Ness Street to the Presidio and Chestnut Street to the Bay was nothing but sand and dirt. It was nothing out there. Well, that's just the way it was at that time. That was up until...I think the first house I remember seeing on Chestnut Street between Fanklin and Gough...a soldier built that home, and that was around 1920, I think, 1919 or 1920, I think it was.

JW: When did it become the fashionable area it is today?

WB: Mm-m-m.

JW: Was that before the Second World War?

WB: Oh, way before the Second World War. In the '20's it became popular. My father had a chance to own every bit of that land down there.

JW: How did that happen?

WB: Well, politics. See, after he got the...he went into business for himself. We had...he had a knack for being...a sort of a little pool hall and a card room. And he was involved in politics. And the mayor...he and the mayor were very good friends. And he had a few people that was on the top of the hog that were, you know, that were very nice to him. They liked him and they were very nice to him. At the time, my father had the money because he was a gambler, you know. At the time he had the money, and he could have bought all of that land out there. They told him, "Take it, Brooks. You got a chance to make yourself...You don't have to pay any taxes on it. Just keep it. Hold on to it, and in a few years, you may not live but then you might...liable to live to see it. In a few years, you'll be a millionaire. It'll be worth something to you". But, you know how uneducated people are. He couldn't see that. No, that was no way for him.

JW: What did he invest his money in?

WB: Mm-m-m. That's a good question. He was a gambler.

JW: So it kind of went back around into...?

WB: He kept the money in circulation.

JW: Where was this pool hall?

WB: The first one?

JW: Yes.

WB: On Lombard Street. Then he got another one, and then he got another place, and then we got a hotel-like. We got the whole building, which was a hotel on the top and a pool hall and a card room in the back, and a auditorium sort of in the front...a small auditorium in the front. And we opened that up and he'd have dances on Saturday nights, and be playing pool and shooting crap. That's when the city was... the town was open then. They'd be shooting dice, and playing poker in the back, and be selling Jack Ass and bootleg whiskey in the front part...and dancing. He had a little band; saxophone, piano and drums.

JW: Where was this place located?

WB: On Greenwich and Steiner.

JW: Okay. What was going on upstairs?

WB: Well, just a...just a legitimate rooming house. That's all. Just a legitimate rooming house. Because my mother ran a legitimate rooming house. We stayed upstairs. Most of the people who stayed there were Spanish-American War veterans. They were most of the fellows that stayed there.

JW: Were they Black or mixed?

WB: They were Black. One or two times they had a couple of White couples that stayed up there, but they were mostly Black, you know.

JW: Were Black people not welcome at other places?

WB: How do you say that? How do you mean?

JW: Why did they happen to stay at that particular place? The neighborhood wasn't mostly Black, was it?

WB: No, I don't think there wasn't over two Black families in the whole neighborhood.

JW: Well, how did Blacks happen to seek out this particular place?

WB: Well, I can't say because I don't know. You see, it wasn't too far from the Presidio, you know. And at that time, soldiers used to, you know...they were only getting $21 a month. At the first of the month, they'd get their money to come down and buy some Jack Ass and hit the streets and get drunk, get put in jail or run back up in the Presidio or something. A lot of them, you know, got married and lived off the post, I guess, and they just disliked living in the neighborhood, I guess. Because it was...I tell you, at that time the neighborhood consisted mostly of Italians and Jews. There were a few Irish. There were a few Irishmen down there because they had a lot of policemen. A lot of the police lived in the area. And firemen. I don't know...people didn't...in that particular district ...now I didn't know too much, in fact, I didn't know anything about this area [the Western Addition] until I had gotten married. Well, when I was a kid, I used to come over here and play, but I didn't know too much about what was going on over here. But over there, [in the Marina] we didn't have any racial problems.

JW: You said your father was involved in politics. What party was he affiliated with?

WB: I don't know. If you can remember who was in office when Mayor Rolph was in power...What was he?

JW: I think he was a Democrat.

WB: Whoever the mayor was, that's who my father was with...that's who he was with. Because I don't remember but two mayors; that's Mayor Rolph and Mayor Rossi. Who came after Rossi?

JW: I can't remember right off. I'll have to look that up. Was he involved basically in local community politics or city-wide politics? How was he involved in politics?

WB: He was just involved in politics...just pulling for the right man to let him shoot craps and gamble.

JW: Oh, I see. He didn't go out and tell people who to vote for, or did he?

WB: Well, he did it, you know, he did it with the people he associated with, you know, the people that came around the place. He'd tell them that he was sponsoring him, that he's a good man, and vote for him, and that's about it. As far as getting on the streets and stump-speaking, no, he didn't do nothing like that. Door-to-door, ring bells...no, he didn't do anything like that.

JW: Who were your friends when you were real young?

WB: You mean...I didn't have no Black friends.

JW: Was this by circumstance? Or did your parents discourage you from hanging out with Black kids?

WB: My parents didn't tell me nothing. I learned the difference my own self. Wasn't no reason to tell me I was Black or White. I just didn't know any better. I mean, didn't nobody tell me, so it didn't bother me...didn't come across my mind until I got to associating with Blacks. Then I began to realize that this is where it is. But when I was up...until I was around 12...it didn't make any difference to me. I wasn't aware of it too much.

JW: People didn't make remarks or say anything that would make you feel different?

WB: No. If they call me something...call me "Nigger", I call 'em a "Jew", "Greek" or anything. I'd call them anything. But I didn't know that it was referring to my race, you know. Because all of us had names. I mean, we had nicknames for all of us. So, it didn't make any difference to me. And then it wasn't too much on the name-calling and stuff, anyway.

JW: You weren't involved in a lot of fights when you were young?

WB: Not about race. No, I was involved in a lot of fights, now, but not about race. If they called me some other kind of name, maybe sometime I'd get in a fight, but not because I was "nigger" or "black" or "Sambo". I didn't like that. I didn't like that "Sambo", because we used to...when I was a kid, they used to have a Little Black Sambo in the books, in school books, and he was always getting into some problem. And I didn't like to be called "Sambo". Not because he was Black, but just because of the circumstances he was getting into.

JW: Did your mother ever tell you not to associate with any kind of people?

WB: No.

JW: How did she feel about the clientele of the hotel?

WB: Oh, it wasn't her choice, you know, it wasn't her choice. But she didn't have to go out to no job. All she had to do was keep the place open, keep the rooms clean, with my help, and collect the rent. Sometimes she cooked a meal for one or two of them or something like that, but that was as far as...you know, it wasn't her choice. She'd rather have had a home of her own, which we finally did get.

JW: When was that?

WB: 1928.

JW: And where was it?

WB: On Buchanan Street, near Union. Between Union and Filbert.

JW: Can you describe the house to me?

WB: What do you mean? How many rooms?

JW: Yes.

WB: Six up and five down.

JW: Wow, that's big. Did she have roomers?

WB: No, just my mother and father and I. And then we had a couple that...he was a railroad man, a Vandercourt, [?] and they moved upstairs. They stayed there until they got ahold of a little change and they bought a place of their own. Then we moved upstairs and rented the downstairs to my aunt. She stayed there up until '48 or '49 or something like that.

JW: This was which aunt?

WB: My father's sister on my father's side.

JW: When did she come out to California?

WB: Maybe 1914 or '15.

JW: So, she came out relatively within a reasonable number of years after her brother did?

WB: Yes.

JW: And she stayed?

WB: Yes, she stayed. She died here.

JW: What kind of work did she do?

WB: She at the time...well, at the time she was working for a private family, you know, taking care of the children and cooking and keeping house for them. She stayed on that job until, oh, maybe... I'm trying to think...I kind of get...it's been so many years and so many things happening in between.

JW: Do you remember the name of the family she worked for?

WB: Stress.

JW: They must have been fairly well off in order to be able to afford to hire help.

WB: They didn't have to be well off to hire anybody then. I don't think she was getting over $40 a month. I don't think so. Well, she didn't have to stay there for one thing. It was, hell, 1933, '34, '35...they weren't paying over $75. When you was getting $75 and staying on a place, you were doing pretty good. Because I used to associate with a lot of them women that had them jobs, you know, that worked for them people, that stayed on the job.

WB: We used to party when people would go on vacation. We'd go to those people's houses and party and drink up their whiskey and party a little while. They [domestics] wasn't getting over $75. When they got a job paying $75, they got a good one. So, at that time when she was working, I don't think she was getting over $40 a month.

JW: Was there any danger of, when people were staying on a place, of her attracting the attention of the master of the house, as like in the South?

WB: The people that hired help were family people, you know, a man and his wife and maybe he had two or three children...a son and a daughter, maybe two daughters, or the two sons. However, they had two or three, and they were family men. And they didn't have no problem, you know, him hitting on the help. They didn't have that.

JW: They didn't?

WB: No. It might have happened in some places, but as far as I knew...because when I was a kid, now...I remember when I was a kid, I was running with kids my own age, who were all White, and we'd be going to these different kids' houses, you know, and playing. They'd have maids and butlers and...what you call them people that wheel, that take care of babies? What do you call them?

JW: Oh, nursemaids?

WB: Nursemaids. And then they had the cook, and they had...One house we played in they had a cook, had a maid, had a nursemaid, had a butler, and some other help. We used to go in the kids' houses. They didn't have this thing like they have now. You had parochial schools and you had public schools. If you went to a parochial school, kids all played together, and went to each other's houses. The parents didn't make no...of course, I was the only Black. It didn't make no difference to them anyway 'cause it wasn't no problem. I was the only Black. We all had a good time.

JW: Did these people's parents speak Italian or Yiddish or something in the home?

WB: Well, in the...the people that hired, they spoke English. They were English. When I say English, they were Americans. They spoke English. But the foreign-speaking people were the help. No, they spoke...and the garbage men spoke Italian. That's what

WB: that Marina consists of mostly now. It was developed by garbage people..by the garbage people. That's when they had horse and wagon. You wouldn't know too much about that. Well, they had horses and wagons in horse and wagon days. The scavengers were Italians. They accumulated all of this money and they just bought out there in the Marina because they could get it for a song and a dance. They all bought out there. When everybody began to find out what good weather it was, and everybody else began to go out there...now, you can't touch nothing for less than a $100,000...Nothing! If you pick up a piece of sand, it cost you $100,000.

JW: Did your parents ever spank you?

WB: (Chuckle) This is going to be hard to believe. For about a year...I would say almost a year...everyday I got it and sometimes twice a day. I didn't only get it from my parents. I got it from them other parents, too. Of course, the same thing applied to the other kids, too.

JW: For what kind of things?

WB: For doing anything...stealing, lying, fighting. That's all we knew how to do.

JW: Were you considered a particularly difficult child, or were you just a typical boy?

WB: I was just one that they didn't catch up with too often. Because a lot of 'em they caught up with, and they got it a little worse than I did. But then, I was just doing...I wasn't doing no more than the rest of the kids. What I did, I did with them. Most of us together, we all did the same things. Of course, sometimes I was a little more louder than some of 'em. But we were all doing the same things. It wasn't no difference.

JW: Did your mother make you do any work around where you lived?

WB: Yes. Yes. I had to chop wood, because at that time we had a wood stove. And I had to chop wood. I had to dust, and had to wash dishes.

JW: Did people feel that dishwashing was unusual for a boy to do?

WB: No, no, no. I wasn't the only one doing it. The rest of us did it. Some of 'em had sisters and had to do it. So, it wasn't ...it was the thing to do, that's all. I mean, you had to do it 'cause your parents were poor and you had to do it.

JW: Did you feel that your parents were more strict or more lenient than other parents?

WB: About the same. They all were about the same, except, you see, both of my parents worked. Well, you see, those Italians, the mothers didn't do no work. The father did all of the work, because the mother was raising kids. She couldn't work 'cause she had children to raise. And them Jews, the same thing, they had children to raise. Because the Jews had little small businesses, like a tailor shop, a little grocery store...a little small business, you know, neighborhood stores. So, somebody had to take care of the stores. So, they didn't...you know, it wasn't no problem.

JW: What kinds of games did you play?

WB: You mean when I was a kid?

JW: Yes.

WB: Oh, I played tops, hopscotch...oh, "Run Chief Run" and "Hide and Seek". Let me see, what else? If I can remember what else I played...jumprope.

JW: Things like baseball, were they popular then?

WB: Yep. I played baseball after I got in the sixth grade. It was from the fifth grade on up. I played baseball and basketball.

JW: Did you ever consider becoming an athlete?

WB: No, not really. I never did give it...after I got into high school, you know, you participate in sports in high school. I went out for basketball and went out for track. I didn't stick with track too long, but I went out for basketball. I didn't go out too much for baseball...I didn't particularly... baseball wasn't too much my bag. I played a little bit, but I didn't make it a point, you know, to pointedly concentrate on baseball. I concentrated more on football than I did on baseball, and I didn't concentrate on that too long. That's about it. Basketball was what I liked best, though. I did better in basketball...and tennis. I played a little tennis, too.

JW: So, it was mainly for the pleasure of it, rather than as a possible career?

WB: Yes. It was really for the pleasure. It was popular at the time and we liked it, you know. And that was it.

JW: How did the family celebrate Christmas?

WB: We had turkey dinner at home. Sometimes we had friends in for Christmas, and sometimes we didn't. Sometimes we went to somebody else's house, to some friends' house and had dinner. I guess it was the same thing...they do the same things now, don't they? It's the same thing.

JW: Yes. Did you have a tree and the usual things?

WB: No, I didn't have a tree. Unfortunately, you see, when I was a kid coming up, they didn't have no electric lights, you know. You had candles. A lot of them trees got in trouble. My parents were scared of them candles, so I didn't have no Christmas tree. I'd go to somebody else's house and knock down a Christmas tree and set their house on fire. But I never had none in my own house. They didn't allow me to have no Christmas tree in my house.

JW: Did they go in for Santa Claus or any of that kind of thing?

WB: Well, I had toys. I used to think about Santa Claus but I never did talk too much. I can't remember when I was a kid...my mama used to talk about it, but my father never did go in for the make-believe too much.

JW: What about on your birthday?

WB: No, they didn't make no pointed thing about no birthday when I was a kid.

JW: Did the family have much leisure time together? When your mother wasn't working, what kinds of things was she doing? Did she do any of those things with you?

WB: Well, she stayed at home. She mostly worked. When she came home from work...well, we went to the show. At that time, you see, when we were coming up, you used to go to the show for a nickel or a dime. And the show every night would change. You got to do a different picture every night. And we'd go to the show. My mother would have to take me to the show because I'd have to read. They didn't have no sound and I'd have to read, you know, across the screen. She'd take me with her, and that's how come I got to go to the show every night. Not <u>every</u> night, but I'd say three nights a week. Then, other than that, we'd visit somebody or somebody would come over and visit us sometimes. It was

WB: never no dull moments, you know. It was always...if she was home, she found some work to do, which I didn't particularly care for that, either, because it would involve me. And I always had pets around the house. At one time, you wouldn't believe it! I had a rabbit, had a dog, had a cat, had a canary, and I was about to get the snake. My mother wouldn't go for the snake. (Chuckle) I had them all in the house at one time.

JW: Where did they stay?

WB: In the house. They stayed in the house.

JW: You mean in little cages?

WB: Cages? Hell, no! The dog and the cat slept together and the rabbit and all of them. They all slept together. Of course, the bird was the only one that didn't get out. Didn't let the bird out. But when the cat was in, he'd come in the house and sleep with the dog, rabbit. Wherever they wanted to sleept, that's where they slept.

JW: Did you have a nickname as a child?

WB: Willie or Bill. Most people called me Willie or Bill. My wife calls me something else. I won't...you can't put that down. (Chuckle)

JW: Which parent do you think you were closest to?

WB: I was closest to my mother. I think I was closest to my mother. Yes, in fact, I'm positive I was closer to my mother.

JW: Did you feel that you were able to talk to her about almost anything?

WB: No, no. Well, you see, my mother not half being educated, a lot of things she didn't understand, you know. And my father dealt in the world up...he was in Cloud Nine. There was no need in me talking to him. He believed in the sword and fire, you know. You either get it or you don't. So, it wasn't no point in me talking to him. But, my mother, I could kind of waylay [sic] a little bit with her. Not too much, you know, 'cause she didn't understand too much. But mostly her. She learned mostly by working for people. That's where she got mostly her learning from what was happening. But it was no occasion for me ever to relate to her.

JW: Did she feel a severe disadvantage not to have gone to school?

WB: Yeah. Yeah, that was one of her hangups...not being able to read and write. Because I used to take her to night school, but she just couldn't seem to grasp it. I guess she got too involved and she couldn't seem to get anything. Or I wasn't helping her. I don't know what it was. But she never did get anywhere from it. She never did...she went to night school for about six months. What she got out of it was nothing.

JW: What did you think of your father as a child?

WB: Oh, I thought a hell of a lot of him when I was a kid, you know, coming up, 'cause my father was nice to me. He'd go upside my head and give me a nickel or a dime, and go out and get me candy or something. But, I thought he was a great guy.

JW: Who were your heroes as a child?

WB: You mean?

JW: People that you either wanted to be like, or looked up to, or read about or thought about?

WB: At what age?

JW: Oh, anytime before you were grown.

WB: Before I was grown? Before I realized what was happening?

JW: Yes.

WB: I wanted to be like the movie stars, like you see in the moving pictures, you know: Douglas Fairbanks, Wallace Reed, Tony Moreno, William S. Hart...I wanted to be like all them guys. You know how kids' fantasies are. Then after I got older, I didn't want to be like nobody but me.

JW: Did your family go to church?

WB: My mother. And I did, too. You see, I was born a Catholic, and I went to a Catholic kindergarten. But I didn't go to a Catholic school. I went to public school. My mother spent quite a bit of time in church. My father wasn't much for that church business...tie him down and take him to church. But I used to go to Sunday School every Sunday. Every Sunday I went to Sunday School, and sometimes I'd stay for church. In fact, I did that up until I was about 21 or 22.

JW: What church was this?

WB: It was two churches I used to go to: I went to Bethel A.M.E. Church, and I went to Zion Church. Sometimes I'd go to Third Baptist. Sometimes I'd go to the Catholic Church. But those were the two churches I went to mostly when I was a kid.

JW: Well, how did it happen that most of your friends and associates were White, but you went to Black churches?

WB: Uh, let me...let me straighten that out a little bit. I went to a Black church because my mother took me. I used to go to the White church, too, the Catholic Church...I used to go there too. But mostly I went to the Black church because my mother took me, and that's where she wanted me to go.

JW: Did she ever say why?

WB: No.

JW: She didn't feel any conflict between the fact that this was a Protestant church and across town?

WB: Nope.

JW: It did take a special effort to get there?

WB: Yes. A nickel carfare. I paid a nickel carfare because I lived in the Marina, and I used to go to church out in Chinatown. So, I'd walk a block and catch the car for a nickel to go up to church, and go on it, and that was it.

JW: How did church affect your life? Did it establish any particular ...? Were you a believer?

WB: Yes. I believe in the church. I believe in Christianity.

JW: I mean, there are certain things that the church often preaches against, like gambling, that your father was involved in. Did your mother ever chastise him about this? Or did you feel any conflict on that?

WB: That didn't bother me at all. See, my father, although he ran a gambling joint, he didn't allow me to become involved in it. He kept it away from me as much as he could. You were young, so you know what I'm trying to get to. Anything you ain't suppose to do, that's the thing you always slip and try to get into. And when he wasn't around, I would be slipping and seeing what's happening. And I wasn't by myself. All of us kids did the same thing.

JW: What about...were you aware of seeing people slightly inebriated and that kind of thing?

WB: Do you mean drunks?

JW: Yes.

WB: Oh, hell, yes! Are you kidding?

JW: How did they feel about those people?

WB: How did "they"? You mean how did...?

JW: Your father and, you know.

WB: Well, they didn't, uh...you put them out when they get drunk, that's all. Most drunks, you know, get drunk and sit down and go to sleep. If they got obnoxious or wanted to fight or something, you put them out, that's all.

JW: Most of the people who came there to drink and to listen to music, were they Black?

WB: That's all they were. Occasionally, a White couple or a White man or a White woman would come in and get involved. But other than that, they were all Black.

JW: What kind of music was played?

WB: You mean when they were dancing?

JW: Yes.

WB: Saxophone, drum, piano. That's all.

JW: Did you ever learn to play an instrument?

WB: No. I was taking vio...yeah, I was taking violin lessons.

JW: At your suggestion?

WB: No. Hell, I <u>had</u> to. It wasn't my idea at all.

JW: Whose ideas was it?

WB: My mother and father's idea. Because my father had a violin, so he wanted me to be a violinist. Then, there were a couple of Italian boys down the block, around the corner, was taking piano lessons, and since we had a piano in the place, he thought well,

WB: maybe you better put the violin down and start on the piano. So, I started on the piano, and I would have been...I guess I would have been all right if I'd stuck with it. But I didn't stick with it, because the teacher...the teacher got involved ...the teacher was married and she got involved...her husband got involved with another woman. And I was there where this situation was happening, and she was giving me piano lessons. As long as I was able to supply her with information, she would give me piano lessons. Of course, my father was paying for it. But the minute the situation got to the point where I didn't understand, and I couldn't give her no information that was to her advantage, she told my father it was a waste of time to give me piano lessons. So she stopped giving me piano lessons. What I did learn, I learned on my own. I don't know "A" from "C" now, but at the time was like all the rest of the kids. We could play three or four tunes, and go to a party and each man would take his turn at the piano, and by the time it got around, well, no tune was ever played twice.

JW: Could your father play the violin?

WB: My father was quite an accomplished musician at one time. He wasn't a musician per se, but he was a musician. He picked up, and could play an accordian, play a violin, play a piano and play a saxaphone. And then when, see, when he was raised down there in the country, you know, that's pretty good.

JW: Right. What was it called, ragtime, or was it classical music?

WB: Oh, ragtime. That's all they had there in Louisiana was ragtime. That's all they had.

JW: What about your mother, was she musically inclined?

WB: No. My mother couldn't play at all.

JW: What did she do for recreation, besides go to the movies?

WB: Who, my mother?

JW: Yes.

WB: Well, visited with friends, and go to the show, that's all.

JW: Was she involved in the church bazaars and things like that?

WB: No. She didn't become involved in nothing that took any pencil work. If it took paper and pencil, she didn't become involved. She knew she couldn't handle it, so she didn't get involved. They were always pulling on her to do something, but she would always back out.

JW: What do you think, when you were, let's say, 10, 11 and 12 years old, what did you imagine you were going to be when you grew up?

WB: I didn't know, and didn't care less. I mean, I didn't stop to think about it, you know. I was busy playing. I was busy doing everything...getting into trouble, getting out of trouble.

JW: Did your parents have any plans for you?

WB: Well, at one time they was planning for me to take up music. But all they were planning for...you see, not having an education, they didn't know what it involved. All they knew was go to school and learn reading, writing and arithmetic. And that's all they worked for was to keep me in school.

JW: Did your father expect that you would take over his business?

WB: Oh, no. I told you he kept me out of it. He kept me away from it as far as possible. You know, it was against the law. He didn't want me to know anything about that. How you gonna keep kids from learning how to gamble? I learned anyway.

JW: What did he expect was going to happen to it when he passed away?

WB: What, his business?

JW: Yes.

WB: Oh, he could care less. Well, you see, as it was, he got out of it anyway. As it was, he didn't stay in it himself anyway. He got out of it, and lived a normal life until he died.

JW: When did he get out of the business?

WB: Oh, around maybe '54 or '55 or something like that. I've forgotten now.

JW: So, he was in it for 30 or more years.

WB: Oh, yes.

JW: When did you first become aware of the fact that being Black was going to make a difference in your life?

WB: Well, when I was going to...when I began to get up in age in Sunday School, you know, when I got about 12 years old. Then

WB: the little girls began hitting on me. Then I began realizing there was a difference between White children and Black children, you know, that I was Black. That's when I began to have problems. When I realized that I was Black.

JW: What kind of problems?

WB: Well, because I broke away from my friends. I began associating with them smokies,[sic] and they were fighting and carrying on. They taught me the art of doing the wrong thing, too. So that's just the way it was.

JW: Can you remember any particular incident that made you feel different?

WB: Well...

JW: I mean, did the young ladies just sort of say, "I don't want to see you anymore, or don't come around here," or...?

WB: No. I broke the relationship myself because I began, little by little I began associating more with Blacks. As I associated more with Blacks, the Whites began, you know, they were all going their way at the same time, but I just didn't go with them as much as I used to, you know. And then I just pulled away from them altogether.

JW: What about moving into the teenage years, and getting interested in dating and that kind of thing? I don't know what they called it in those days...Courting?

WB: Well, I didn't have any girlfriends until I...then none of the fellows had what you call real Black girlfriends. They had... they were friendly with all the girls and the fellows were all friendly, but there were certain girls that the fellows liked, and certain fellows that the girls liked. And when you went to parties, you know, you'd single them out. But as far to say that "I'm going with her", or, "She's going with me", no. There was no deal like that. "He likes her" and "She likes him", and that's as far as it went, you know. We didn't make no big thing like they do now, like these kids do now. No, we didn't have nothing like that.

JW: But as you got older and perhaps more serious about relationships, did you find...were you accepted in the Black community?

WB: Oh, yeah. Well, let's put it this way...

JW: You know, some people who are religious look down on people who are involved in...

WB: I wasn't accepted too much because of my father's background. That was always a problem to me, because certain people would have parties and the kids would go, and they wouldn't invite me because they felt that I was a pimp or I was a hustler or I was a gambler. They just didn't want me around because they figured my father's background would rub off on me or something like that. You know how old folks think at that time. So I missed a lot of parties. But that didn't bother me that much because those that I missed didn't bother me because I made up when I did get to them. So it didn't make too much difference.

JW: What was likely to make you angry when you were a child?

WB: In reference to circumstances?

JW: Anything. When you got mad, what was it that was making you mad?

WB: Well, I wasn't...I didn't have too much patience. I don't know, I can't...

JW: Do you remember ever like losing control?

WB: No.

JW: Did you ever argue with your parents?

WB: With my parents? I'd argue with them, but I never did lose control, you know. I'd get out of patience with my father when I got older, because he wouldn't accept a lot of things that I knew were right. He wouldn't accept them because he thought I was stupid. But I didn't argue with him because I knew it was no point in arguing with him.

JW: When did they stop using corporal punishment? How old were you?

WB: When did they stop what?

JW: You said they spanked you when you were young. When did they stop spanking you?

WB: I guess I was about 14 or 15 when I got my last whipping.

JW: Did you use to tell them that you were not going to be spanked anymore?

WB: Oh, no, no, no. It was no occasion for that. It was no...I just didn't do the things that I did that would warrent, you know, a spanking or nothing like that. They deprived me of certain things, but other than that, we never did come to the point where we would get to fighting or nothing like that. My mother would sometime go upside my head but that didn't bother me, you know. My father never did pay too much attention. He'd have a few words and that was it.

JW: Did the family ever take trips away from San Francisco?

WB: Yes.

JW: Where did you go?

WB: Well, my father made a couple of trips...in fact, he made several trips to New Orleans to see his friends. Then the last time he left he went to...he made a trip to New York. That's about it. My mother made a couple of trips. She went to Chicago a couple of times, and she went to New Orleans a couple of times.

JW: Did they take you to New Orleans when you were still...?

WB: My mother...the first time I left the state, I left with my mother and went to New Orleans.

JW: What did you think of it?

WB: I didn't like it. I was 16. I wanted to get right back on the train right then. I saw that sign up there that said, "Colored" and "White", and I didn't like that, either. You see, I wasn't used to that.

JW: How long were you down there?

WB: About eight days.

JW: Was it in the summer?

WB: Yes.

JW: Was it hot?

WB: You damn right it was hot. Whew! It rained a couple of times, but that didn't help it any.

JW: Your mother, I guess, was pretty excited about being back home.

WB: No.

JW: She didn't like it much either?

WB: She had gotten away, because remember my mother was young...she was young when she came out here. So, I don't know how they did down in the South, but I know how they did here, you know. It was like one of the family. You worked for them, but you was like one of the family. See now, when I was a kid coming up, my mother worked for a family that had a little baby...named the Grant family. I only lived a couple of blocks from the house, and when I'd get off from school, sometimes my mother would be home waiting for me and she'd take me back to work with her when she got ready to prepare dinner. Well, it was my place to take care of that baby, you know. And when the family would serve dinner, we'd sit in the kitchen and eat. Sometimes at lunch time, you know, before the man of the house came in, the lady of the house would sit in the kitchen and eat with all of us. Just she and my mother and I and the little baby. My mother would bring the baby home, when she'd come home for lunch. When she'd get a break in the afternoon, she'd come home and she'd sit until I got off from school. And I'd try not to get home from school because I didn't want to go up there and be bothered with that baby, you know. It was my place to take care of that baby. It was just like a big family. Where my aunt worked, I used to go up there. She wasn't living too far from the house and they had two children, and I'd go up there and play with the kids and sometimes the kids would come home with me. Then the Grants had another family, the Boltons. Now, they were really rich. The Boltons, I thought they were really rich because they had two great big automobiles, and they had two girls. One of the girls was a little older than I was...when I say a little older, she might have been a year, maybe two years older than I was. And the other one was just about my age. Now, those little girls were pretty hip. They were a little bit more hip than I wanted them to be, because they knew a little more about life than I wanted them to know. And that little girl became attached to me, the oldest one. Wherever I'd go, she'd want to go.

END TAPE

WB: See, the father picked up on what the girl was trying to do. But the mother half believed it and half didn't believe it. But the Grants, who were friends of theirs...who my mother worked for, the father tried to get them to stop me from coming around because he couldn't break the relationship with his girls. And the man, Grant, told him no. They called my mother "Daisy". He said, "No, Daisy is working for us. Now, if you don't want your girls to come around, you stop your girls from coming around. I'm not gonna stop him from coming around." He said, "Because his mother is working here, and my baby likes him. So as long as he's here...and as long as they're here, they're coming. If you don't want your daughters to come, you stop your daughter from coming." That almost broke that relationship up between those two men, because he couldn't stop his daughters. His daughters were spoiled and he couldn't stop them.

JW: How old were you then?

WB: I was about 10 or 11.

JW: Oh, I see. Still relatively young.

WB: Yes.

JW: Why was it that he objected? Was it because you were Black or because you weren't rich?

WB: I was Black. I mean...he objected, you see, he objected because he didn't want his daughter to become involved. He didn't want his daughter...Well, I can see his point now. But then I didn't see it. In fact, I didn't know what it was all about then, anyway. But now, I can see his point. He didn't want his daughter to grow up around no...to fall in love with no Black boy, and he was high in society. What would that look like? And he couldn't stop them. It was nothing he could do with them girls now.

JW: Well, how did it end?

WB: Well, I tell you exactly how it ended. They had a...they bought a place down in Burlingame. They bought a place down in Burlingame, and we used to go there for the summer. And they were such good friends that every summer the both of them would go down there. And naturally, that left me to play with the girls. That left me with the girls. Well, I didn't want to be bothered with no girls. If it was boys, I wouldn't have minded. But with girls, I objected to being in relationship...being in close relationship. So, I used to go about a block and a half...from the place was a big school that had a big...you know, a whole lot of gadgets to play on. So, I would go down there and play. And

WB: the girls would run right behind me. They'd come right on down there right behind me to play. He had to come and get them because I wouldn't come home. He'd have to come down there and get them. When they'd come home...when he'd get them home, about time he'd get them home, then I'd come home. And the relationship had gotten so close, so tight, until I had to break it myself. Because they got so they wanted to come to the house, you know. And they didn't live that far...only a block or so, because it was walking distance. And the father couldn't do a damn thing about it. And the mother, I don't think wanted to. She couldn't have cared less. I don't think he really convinced her that it was a relationship building up there. I don't think he convinced her to that effect. So, I kind of broke off myself, because of instead of me going up to the Grants with my mother, I'd go on the lot and play with the boys. And the girls couldn't come in there because them Dago boys would work them over, and they couldn't take that. So, the relationship just kind of drifted apart like that. But it was lovely while it lasted. (Laughter)

JW: You said that...we got into this because you were telling me something about this trip to New Orleans, and how neither you or your mother liked it down there.

WB: Well, you see, well, my mother had become acclimated to, you know, the people in San Francisco. She had become acclimated to doing like she wanted to do, and how she wanted to do, and down there they didn't have no bathtub, you had to wash in a tub. And if you washed in hot water, you had to put it on the stove to heat it. And you had to wash in the middle of the kitchen. And I didn't like that either. I didn't like no conditions down there at all. And where my father lived, which was in the city, but sort of on the outskirts of the city like, you had to walk on this dirt road. When it rained, you had to take a rowboat almost. I didn't like that either. It was down by the stockyards. I didn't like that either.

JW: Because of the smell?

WB: Not because of the smell so much. I just didn't like it because it was...I didn't like the cattle...being aroung all them cattle. I didn't like that at all. Oh, the smell I got used to. It wasn't no big thing, the smell. I just didn't like walking through them cow flops, because they'd run the cattle right through the middle of the street, and if the sun didn't dry that ground up hard, you were walking in cow flops. And I didn't like that. I had shoes because I didn't go barefooted. I didn't like that at all.

JW: What did your New Orleans relatives think of you?

WB: Oh, I don't know if I ever gave them a chance to think that much about me. You see, this was the first time they'd seen me since I was a baby, since I left there. So, they didn't know too much about me, anyway.

JW: But you've been back there several times since.

WB: No, I haven't.

JW: You haven't been back?

WB: No way, baby! No way! I went down there this last time because we'd come off this tour in the Caribbean and we stopped in New Orleans. And my wife said that I should see my cousin, which I did. Which I'm glad I did stop to see her because she's a lovely person. But other than that, I wouldn't have stopped. I wouldn't have stopped in New Orleans. It didn't have nothing to offer me. Of course, conditions now aren't the way conditions were in 1925. It's a lot different.

JW: What did you think about school? Did you enjoy it or not?

WB: In school? Yeah, I never did play hookey, you know. I stayed in school.

JW: Did you do well?

WB: No. I managed to keep my head above water. Sometimes it got under water, but I managed to get out of it. I graduated with a C+. I just got out.

JW: What was your favorite subject?

WB: Well, I guess you couldn't call manual arts work a subject, would you?

JW: I don't know what they call them today. Shop, I guess.

WB: "Shop". That's what it is. I had...I was an A student in machine shop. I was an A student in cabinet shop. I was an A student in electrical shop. Now when it come to the academical courses like English, I was no good in English. I just did enough of it to pass. I couldn't make it with foreign language. Science, I took science. I was pretty good at science. I was a B+ student in science, English, history, ancient history. I was a B+ student in ancient history. What are the subjects now?

JW: Geography?

WB: No. We didn't have that in high school. We got that in grammar school. I was fair. When I was in grammar school I was fair. I could have done better, but I was too busy doing other things. So I just managed enough to keep my head above water.

JW: What were your extracurricular activities besides sports? Anything else?

WB: No. Nothing else.

JW: What would you do on weekends when school was out in high school?

WB: In high school? Chase the girls.

JW: Did you chase them in groups?

WB: Yeah.

JW: When did people start breaking up in...?

WB: You mean singling off?

JW: Yes.

WB: Oh, I guess when I was about 16. From 16 on, we began to know the birds from the bees.

JW: How did people find out about the facts of life?

WB: Well, let me tell you something. I been fooling with little girls since I was old enough to walk, you know. I didn't think I was doing anyting wrong. I didn't know. In fact, I guess none of us did because we were all doing the same thing. And I didn't know any better, you know. So, to me, this was no big thing.

JW: Was it a special type of little girl, or were all the little girls doing it?

WB: Well, there were certain little girls you liked, you know... certain little girls you liked, you know, you single off. Sometimes you got singled off with somebody you didn't like, but you did...you know, you played with her anyway.

JW: Weren't they afraid of getting pregnant?

WB: At that age?

JW: Oh, you're talking about real little.

WB: Yeah.

JW: What about in high school?

WB: We didn't think about that. I mean, it was happening, but it didn't come across. That wasn't a thing that we thought about. You know, I don't remember ever having to think too strongly about a girl getting pregnant. I thought about it every now and then. But as far as it happening to me, I never...I didn't give it much of a thought.

JW: Was it considered the girl's responsibility if it happened?

WB: I never did consider that. It was just, if it happened, it happened. Don't misunderstand me, now. There was a lot of them things that was happening. A lot of girls were getting caught. They were talking about it, you know. But, as an individual, I never did think too much about it.

JW: What high school was it that you attended?

WB: Well, the first high school I went to was Lowell. That was my first high school.

JW: Was it the elite high school at that time?

WB: Yeah.

JW: You had to have a certain average to get in at that time?

WB: Yeah.

JW: Well, you must have been doing pretty well, then.

WB: Well, I had a little push. You see, I was pretty good, and then, I had a couple of people in City Hall that liked me. So, it wasn't no problem. I got right in, you know.

JW: Did you find it difficult once you got in?

WB: No, I didn't find it difficult. To me, it was just like any other school, because I had never been to high school before. So I didn't know any different. But I didn't find nothing that was too out-of-the-way for me. It was all right with me.

JW: Why did you switch from Lowell?

WB: Well, I got "nickel-slick", and you had to study at Lowell. It wasn't no such thing as cutting classes and not making the grade. The teachers would put you right on the carpet and give you a bad time about it, and I didn't like that. So, I transferred. What did I do? Yes, I did. I transferred from Lowell and I went to Commerce. At that time, Commerce was considered a girls' school. But I went there. I think I went there two months and I got out of there. Then I quit school altogether. Just put it down and said...Well, my mother said, "Well, you're going to do one of two things: You're either gonna go to school or go to work." I didn't like the work part either. So, I went to part-time school. At that time, you had to go to school, I think, until you were 18. You went a half day one day a week until you were 18, then after that, you didn't have to go at all. But I went a half a day every day, because I didn't want to drop my standing in high school. I did that for two years.

JW: What was the name of the school?

WB: Part-time. That was the name of it.

JW: Part-time?

WB: Part-time. That was the name of it. I did that for two years, and I thought, because when I quit school, I was in the second grade...I thought then that I could get my diploma. I found out that I couldn't get a legitimate diploma on Part-time. So I had to go to night school. I went to Galileo Night School for one year, plus my half day part-time, in order to get my diploma and legitimately graduate. You see, I had to have a hundred and forty-four credits to graduate on. If you didn't have 144 credits, you couldn't graduate. I had 144 and a half. I just did get out of there.

JW: What were you doing when you weren't in school then, after your class? What kind of job did you have?

WB: What job?

JW: Oh, you just went part-time, then ran the streets?

WB: That's right. I didn't go to no job or work. I told you work and me didn't get along too well. I didn't like to work.

JW: When did you get your first job?

WB: In 19...no, I got my first job in 1929.

JW: And what was that?

WB: I was at Topsy's Roost. I was busboy. Then I got to dancing. I used to do a little dancing.

JW: What kind?

WB: Tap dancing. And I danced for...just enough to keep me from going on a job. (Laughter)

JW: Did it pay well enough?

WB: Pay me? I didn't need the pay. It paid well enough. I wasn't doing it for the money. I was doing it because I, you know, a lot of my friends that I liked were entertainers. I was just doing it just to keep in with the clique and not because I was crazy about it. Then when I went out to Topsy's Roost, I got a job out there as busboy. Me and this same fellow you're going to talk to, Eddie Alley, were busboys out there together. He was learning how to play drums, so I decided I wanted to make a little extra money, so I started entertaining out there, too. Besides doing the busboy work, I was doing a little entertaining. And it paid well because they was throwing money at me. I'd pick up around $15 or $20 a night. And if you can figure what the Depression was, $15 or $20 a night was a whole lot of money. And just like I made it, that's just the way I spent it.

JW: What did you spend it on?

WB: Renting automobiles, and running to Oakland, chasing girls, buying a little bit of whiskey every now and then. Just having a good time.

JW: How old were you when you bought your first car?

WB: How old was I when I actually bought my first car?

JW: Yes.

WB: You see, I was married before, and while I was in the Service, my wife bought a car, a second-hand car.

JW: This was in the First World War? Oh, that's right. You weren't old enough.

WB: No. Second World War. Let's see, when did I get out of the Service? '46. She had a car when I got out of the Service. She had a car. And then we got...

JW: What kind of car was that?

WB: A Chrysler...a Windsor...a Chrysler Windsor four-door sedan.

JW: Was that considered a fairly fancy car?

WB: A fairly good car at that time because you couldn't buy automobiles then. You couldn't get gas; you couldn't get anything. I don't know how she managed, but she managed. She was a manipulator. Anyway, we got a divorce, and right after the divorce, my father gave me a Studebaker. I had a Studebaker President 8 four-door sedan. He gave it to me. So I drove that for a while until...what happened? It broke down. Then I bought a Desoto...a brand new Desoto. That was '52. That was when I bought my first car...'52.

JW: Going back a little ways, how did you learn how to tap?

WB: Kids altogether...all of us were together, you know: one start, the other one start, and you pick up a step here, and you pick up a step there...

JW: Well, you must have been pretty good if people were throwing $20 at you. (Laughter)

WB: Well, at that time, it wasn't...you see, you go out there and you drink a little whiskey. And then I knew a lot of people, you know, having been raised here. I knew a lot of people. People would come out there just to see me dance, and throwing a quarter or fifty-cents, you know. Not no dollars. But they would throw quarters, fifty-cents, nickels, pennies, anything. When they'd get through, I mean, I'd average about $10 or $15 a night, plus what them other fellows was picking up stealing. So, you know, I must have been doing pretty good.

JW: The name of this place was what?

WB: Topsy's Roost.

JW: And where was it?

WB: Out on the beach, the Great Highway. A chicken shack.

JW: Were people of all races welcome there?

WB: Well, let's put it this way: They didn't welcome you, but you could go. If you came, they'd sit you in the back somewhere. But they didn't turn you down.

JW: Well, I remember seeing him on television. I never had an occasion to meet him.

WB: Well, he's the same...he was naive...he was a gentleman. He was a gentleman.

JW: Would he play when he would come out there?

WB: No, no. He would come out there to eat, you know, to eat and have dinner and be entertained, you know, and sit around and drink.

JW: Did people treat him like a celebrity?

WB: Well, no, they didn't run for autographs. But, you know, they looked up to him...the "Duke", that's all. You see, my father had a nightclub...he had a nightclub, and we had entertainers there.

JW: What was the name of your father's club?

WB: Plantation.

JW: There was a famous club in New York named the Plantation, wasn't it?

WB: I don't know...I don't know.

JW: Was it decorated to look like one?

WB: Well, yeah, we had paintings on the wall, you know, of slavery and "coons" playing guitars...a great big, big wall...with watermelons in the field to look like a plantation.

JW: Why do you think this was done? Since Black people mostly came there, was this considered a joke or what?

WB: Oh, no, no. It was a...you see, the place had two parts to it. They had a front part and a back part. And the back part was the cabaret part where we had entertainers. We had a piano player, had a girl dancer, two girl dancers and a boy dancer.

JW: What kind of dances did they do?

WB: They were dancers, entertainers. They did sort of a tap and [unintelligible] the girls did the...sang, and tapped, and danced.

JW: No burlesque?

WB: No, no, no. No burlesque. No. Legitimate.

JW: Would it be a place that a man could bring his wife?

WB: Yeah, definitely.

JW: But during the '20's...

WB: No, it wasn't during the '20's now. You're going back too far. This wasn't during the '20's.

JW: Oh, it wasn't?

WB: No, this was during...When did Roosevelt go in?

JW: 1933.

WB: That's when it started. See, because that's when they opened up. That's when they brought booze back. That's when you could have caberets and legitimate sale of whiskey. That's when it was.

JW: So, your father worked for the stove people up until then?

WB: No, no, no. He worked for the stove people up until 1918.

JW: And then what happened?

WB: He went into a pool room. He set up a pool room and a card room. And from there he got a little larger place, and he had a dance hall, a card room, and a pool room all together. Then from there he went into cabarets.

JW: When did the cabaret close?

WB: I don't know when the cabaret closed.

JW: Did it run up through the War years?

WB: No, it closed up around about...he only stayed open a couple of years.

JW: And why was that? Was he not making money?

WB: Well, no, he was making money. You see, at that time, the city was kind of corrupt...politics, policemen, whores and pimps.

WB: They were all mixed up together there. And my father took a partner in, and the police department didn't like him. They wouldn't let him go. So they told my father you either get rid of him or we'll close you up. So my father closed up.

JW: So in order to stay in business, your father had to kickback to the police department on a regular basis?

WB: Yes, a little bit. He had to do a little kickback. Before it became legitimate, he had to kickback. All, anybody who was in business had to kickback a little bit to the police. The police ran the town...Irish town. The police ran the town. If you did anything that wasn't right, you either paid off or closed up.

JW: How did he manage to keep street walkers out of his place?

WB: He didn't keep 'em out. They didn't come in that much. You see, street walkers didn't have no place in no gambling joint. They couldn't make no money in no gambling joint. They'd get their butt whipped. Street walkers steal, you know. They make their living...that's what they call them street walkers for. Stealing. They ain't got no business in no gambling joint.

JW: Where would someone go if they were interested in that kind of thing?

WB: In gambling?

JW: No, a companion...

WB: Prostitutes?

JW: Yes.

WB: He'd either go to a whorehouse or pick them up on the streets. You take a chance picking them up on the streets. They had legitimate whorehouses here, you know. When I say "legitimate" whorehouses, they had whorehouses but they were run legit. But they were paying off, in order to keep the doors open.

JW: Were Black women involved in this?

WB: Some had mixed; some had all White; some had all Chinese. They had all kinds. You name 'em, they had 'em.

JW: Was this in Barbary Coast?

WB: No, no. The Barbary Coast had been closed a long time. No, it was just right after Prohibition and during Prohibition.

JW: Where were these places located?

WB: All over the city.

JW: All over?

WB: When I say all over the city, I mean downtown, the Tenderloin and all that neighborhood; that's where it was centrally located. Some was in Chinatown and some was in North Beach. They didn't have nothing out in the Marina. They had one or two out there, but, hell, you couldn't...there was nothing happening out there. There was no action out there.

JW: If you had to live those first twenty years over again, what would you change?

WB: What would I do?

JW: Do you feel there were any mistakes you made or things retrospectively that you would have done differently?

WB: Yes, I would have. If I had to live 'em over...if I had to live 'em over again, knowing what I know now? Is that what you're trying to say?

JW: Right.

WB: Well, you know doggone well I would change. My whole outlook on life would have changed because I...

JW: It seemed like you were having a good time.

WB: I wouldn't have broken the relationship, you see, because my relationship was good with the people that I...with the kids that I was raised with. My contact was good. I would have stuck with it. And I would have been better off for it. Because at one time I was playing basketball when I was in high school, J. Hale, and there was a couple of other fellows, kids who were going to school together. Of course, Hale was older than me because he was a senior and I was only a sophmore. But we had a damn good relationship. And his sister was liking me a little bit too. I used to go to his house and eat...put my feet under his table just as regular as he would put his feet under my table. We were just like two brothers. The three of us were just like brothers and sister, and the parents accepted it that way. And I was doing very well for myself. Then his father opened up...he didn't open up, he was already in...he

WB: was the leading shareholder in which is now United. [?] At that time, I don't know what it was. When Hale graduated from high school, he wanted me to go with him back East to set up another ...you know, to help him set up another plant back there. I couldn't see that you know...a little girl was hitting on me too regular for that. Then his sister wanted me to stay here, and that was good for me, too. But I wouldn't go. And I should have went. See, if I had went, I'd have been a millionaire. I'd have been rich. But you see, I had broken off a bell of a lot of relationships that I grew up with that I should have stayed with. And I didn't stay with it. I just didn't take advantage of my opportunities.

JW: Anything else?

WB: You mean that I would like...That in particular and I would have finished my education. I would have stayed in school, and got my education. I would have finished up. I started to taking aeronautics, and I would have stuck with it because I did like flying. The only reason I really didn't get too involved with it was because when I went to the airport...as long as I was taking theory...lovely. But the minute I had to get that... I had to have so many hours in the air and I didn't have a plane of my own. But the minute that came, the peckerwoods started to acting up. They didn't want to be flying with no niggers, so that broke that up.

JW: Was this during the War?

WB: No, no, no...way before the War. Way, way before the War. Right after I left Topsy's Roose out there...1928 or '29.

JW: How did you get interested in that?

WB: What? Aeronautics?

JW: Yes.

WB: Well, I always...you see, they used to have a Crissy...not a Crissy Field...they used to have an airfield out here at the Marina. They used to have an airfield out there. When we kids, all the kids used to go down there. Planes fascinated us, you know. We was all fascinated with planes. And we managed to see a couple of bad accidents. I happened to see...have you ever studied the history about the first men to fly airplanes and all that?

JW: Yes.

WB: Well, a man named Beechy [?] and a man named Art Smith used to fly out there during the Fair, the 1915 Fair. I was both of them die in a plane. Their plane went down. And planes just ...I don't know, they've always been, I've always been attracted to them. I've always wanted to fly. I've always been wanting to fly. That's after I became, you know, pretty good size.

JW: No one told you that there were no...or very few Black people involved in aviation?

WB: At that time? None was involved...not here in San Francisco. But I didn't...see, that didn't hit me until after I began to find out...after them peckerwoods got to telling me...after I found out. You see, because Hale himself was the main man in the field, and because he had taken a liking to me and because he was pushing me. He wasn't doing it for the rest of them down there. You know, there was a little jealousy there. But they couldn't do anything about it because he was the boss; he was the kingpin. The only thing they could do was by organization, union...I guess it was union then. You see, they could refuse to do the mechanical work on the plane.

END TAPE

[JW: The following is the second interview session with Mr. Willie Brooks, recorded in the den of his home at 1912 Turk Street, in San Francisco, on the afternoon of Tuesday, March 13, 1979. For reasons still not completely understood, the tape of an interview session with Mr. Brooks, recorded July 21, 1978, about seven months ago, was practically inaudible. He kindly consented to redoing the questions from that session; and even today our first attempt didn't record and so discussions of his trip to Manila and stay in Japan during the early Thirties and his military career in the Ambulance Service South Pacific are referred to in the interview report but otherwise lost.]

JW: How did you get your job at Metropolitan Life?

WB: Well, I got that through...the job was left vacant and Eddie came by my house and at the time I wasn't working.

JW: You mean Eddie Alley?

WB: Eddie Alley. And he told my wife that there was a job vacant down there if I went down there and apply, I could possibly get it. So I wasn't looking for no job too much anyway, but I had to go. In the meantime, my wife had called down there because she had previously worked down there and she and the boss that I was going to work for were pretty good friends. She told him that I was coming down there and to give me consideration. And he did. And that's where I stayed for thirty-five years; right there at the Metropolitan.

JW: Now what had you been doing before you got that job?

WB: Anything I could or anybody I could.

JW: Why were you having trouble finding work?

WB: I wasn't looking too hard. At that time, it was pretty tough. When was that...'33, '34, '35, '36. It was pretty rough then. Jobs weren't too plentiful. I wasn't looking too hard, anyway.

JW: How did you manage to support yourself?

WB: My wife was working. It was hard. We managed. I managed.

JW: What was the job you started out doing there?

WB: In the kitchen...a scullion in the kitchen...handyman, more or less.

JW: And how did you advance up the ladder?

WB: Well, I...There was a job open on the...no, the manager of the building force...he and I were pretty good friends. He said, "What are you working in here for? Come on in my department." At that time it was washing windows. He said, "Come on, I'll teach you how to wash windows. Better here than you would be up there." I thought about it. It was more money, too. I said, "Okay." So I got on there. And that's where I stayed except that they...status was different...a department change. I went from window washing to utility man and I went as a maintenance man and that's where I stayed. Then I went...No. It was under maintenance and then they decided they wanted me as a special policeman...special officer...security. And I stayed in that for a while until they got that Englishman from England. He didn't have...He had a little larceny in his heart and he and I didn't get along so I got back out...I got out of that and went back into maintenance.

JW: Did you ever attempt to go into sales?

WB: No, I didn't attempt to. They wanted to put...The president of the company...he and I were very good friends...very good friends and he asked me did I want to. "Why do you want to stay in this? Why don't you come on and go into the office? The chance for advancement is better."

JW: About when was this he told you this? Was it after the Second World War?

WB: Yes. After the Second World War. And that the chances for advancement were better. It didn't have no...They didn't have ...Eddie was the only Negro man that had gone into the...left the maintenance and gone into the office force and so he asked me if I wanted to go. So I told him I'd think about it. So I came home and talked with Marie about it. She said, "Well, why don't you go?" I could see her point, you know. Me going into the office force meant status. I couldn't see sitting at no desk. I couldn't see that. So I just told him, I said, "No, Mr. North," I said. He said, "It's okay. It's up to you. Whenever you decide you want to go, I will see that you get a good spot." So I didn't go. I stayed right where I was. And I'm glad I did. I liked it better there. I had more freedom, no pressures. If I had went into the office, I'd have been under pressure, you know. So I didn't. I liked what I was doing.

JW: During the War, a lot more Black people came to San Francisco. When were you first aware that there were a lot of people coming in?

WB: After I came out of Service. You see, I wasn't aware of it before I went into Service. It wasn't none here so to speak of because I went in...When did the War start; in '41, '42? It wasn't too many here then. Damn few here then...had migrated here then. Most of those that had migrated here then were running from Uncle Sam. Running from the Army or the Navy or whatever it was military...running from the military. Weren't too many here. But then after the War got started good, then the shipyards opened and they came by the boat loads, by the train loads, by the plane loads. Anyway they could get here: walking, crawling, creeping, anything. Anyway they could get here...piggyback...they came.

JW: So when you got back here, the population had...

WB: Oh, it had boomed. Yeah.

JW: And what was your impression of the new people that came in?

WB: Comme ci, comme ca. Some of them...I made friends with some and some I didn't particularly care for. It didn't make no big difference. I had my own set I associated with. It didn't make too much trouble. It didn't make no bother to me. I wasn't interested one way or the other, you know. I didn't come in contact with them that much except when you go to a bar where I used to see all of my friends, and then met some of my friends going out. It was too much happening and I didn't ...and all I saw were strangers and I wasn't too much impressed with that, so I didn't go out to the bars too much. Just like now, I don't go to the bars at all because I don't know nobody in the bars.

JW: What do you think...What changes came about as a result of so many Black people being here.

WB: Oh, the economic change...the whole city changed...position, jobwise, attitudes, living conditions...everything changed.

JW: For the better or for the worse?

WB: Oh, naturally for the better. Naturally for the better. You see, at that time, when I was here, when I was...Blacks only had jobs as bootblacks, doormen and what else? Janitors... that was about it. There weren't any...there were no job opportunities. There were plenty of that...there were plenty of that type but there were no what you call clerical worker or office work. There wasn't anything...there were a few, a damn few...five, six, seven maybe that worked in the office... that had office jobs. They didn't pay a damn thing. You know,

WB: I had a chance at one time to work out of the Mayor's office. That's through my father's political, you know, pull, but I didn't like that either. That meant sitting at a desk. I didn't like that either, so I didn't take that.

JW: How did the other people who were native...well, not native... had been in California for a long time...how did the other Black people who had been here for a long time react to the ones coming in?

WB: They always said, "Them ignorant Negroes messing it all up." But it wasn't quite that bad. No, it wasn't quite that bad. I think, I think they made it better, you know. After they came, they started businesses of their own, you know, and made the White man see that, [unintelligible] the Negroes that was putting the kink in his pocket book so in order for his to do it, he'd have to...to pull in some of the Negroes, he'd have to hire them. You know, this made it better for him. It made it better all the way around. It made it better.

JW: What fraternities did you belong to?

WB: None. No, I didn't belong to no fraternities. I went to... let's see, I went to UC for about maybe a year or a year and a half or something like that. I went to junior college... San Mateo Junior College...in and out. Everyone of them schools down there I was in and out...mostly out than in, but I wasn't interested too much in school. Only reason for going to school was keeping me from working and that's the only reason I went to school. But other than that, I wasn't too much interested.

JW: You went to UC in Berkeley or UC...?

WB: UC in Berkeley.

JW: What were you studying?

WB: What do you call that...the moon and the stars?

JW: Astronomy?

WB: Yes.

JW: Oh, aviation. But you did belong to something called the Ramblers?

WB: Yes, but that was a club we started when we were kids, you know. We started the Ramblers Club. We stayed in it until we were up in our teens. I guess we were in our teens, and then we turned it over to a younger group because we got too involved in other things. Fellows going here and got married, you know, got dis-

WB: interested, and we just turned it over to a younger group that was able to carry on.

JW: What about the [unintelligible] Club? When did it start?

WB: Oh, they'll have their fiftyth anniversary pretty soon, or they already had it or something. I've forgotten now. As far as I know, it started in the Thirties.

JW: And what was the purpose of it?

WB: Just a social club. A social club, that's all. Socializing, entertaining, being entertained...that's all.

JW: Were any of the members...were all of the members old-time Californians?

WB: No. Let's see. Let's see if I can say...Eddie Alley, Willie Carpenter, myself, Elliott Worth, Walter Thomas. These are the original...original thirteen in there. Earl Adams, Paul Green. I'm talking about people that...I think Elliott was born in California, but the rest of them that I named were from different parts. Walter was from Texas, I think, and Earl and Earl were from Oklahoma. Paul Green was from Arizona. I was from...of course, I didn't belong to it then. When it first started, I didn't belong to it. Henry Stewart belonged to it. Now he was a native. He was born here.

JW: Was that...Is he any relationship to Catherine unintelligible ?

WB: No. No, Catherine is older than he and I. See, he's younger than I am. So she's older than I am. Then the fact that...

JW: Her maiden name was Stewart. That's why I...

WB: Stewart. No, no. They were no relations...there was no relationship at all. In fact, she didn't even know him then. Didn't even know him then.

JW: Did you ever hear of Marcus Garvey as you were coming up?

WB: Yes. I heard of him and that's about it too.

JW: There was a Garvey branch chapter out here in Oakland.

WB: I know there was. I know of it, but I didn't know anything about it. I wasn't interested so I didn't go into it, you know.

JW: Was there a Black society group here in San Francisco?

WB: Yes. The Cosmo Club was considered a Black society group. But you really didn't...this is going to be hard to understand. You really didn't have a society...society is considered class. You see, when they turned out to an affair, Black pimps and the whores and everybody went to it, you know, so you couldn't say it was society. Everybody was there, you know, that lived in the city and could get an invitation was there.

JW: Nobody was excluded?

WB: No. You had people from all walks of life was there. It wasn't just like, you know, society is all people from a certain category that go to this thing. No, no. Nothing like that. Hell, if you didn't take...if you didn't take everybody that was in every category, you had nobody there, you know, because there weren't that many Blacks in San Francisco at that time. This was before the War.

JW: There was not a group of Black people who set themselves apart because they were lighter skin?

WB: No. No, we didn't have that. That's for sure. We didn't have that. That's Louisiana and Washington.

JW: You said that at one time your mother had...seemed to be in a difficult position because she couldn't read and write and felt that in some kind of way that was a disadvantage for her to be accepted by people.

WB: Yes, she kind of...kind of held herself in from making contact with people. She didn't like to become too involved because if it became...come to a point where she had to do a little reading and a little writing, she was left out. She felt the less people knew about this...about her, the better off she was. So she kept herself sort of...in fact, she kept herself out of that as much as she possibly could, but she was a well-liked woman. She went wherever she chose to go, but where she chose to go and associate with the people she chose to associate with; people who would understand, you know, that there was no paperwork involved and there was no book work involved.

JW: And you also talked before about the fact that sometimes you weren't accepted everywhere because of your father's business.

WB: That's right.

JW: Do you want to talk about that just a little bit?

WB: Ain't nothing to say except that I, you know, running a gambling house and a pool hall and catering to the public as it were, what public there was...Black mostly...it was an outlet for a lot of people, a lot of Black men to come and associate, shoot pool, play cards and do a little gambling. Sometimes they would come there and spend a few minutes and get in the streets and chase the whores, or I should say prostitutes, or chase the women, and then they'd say they were there and they would go home, and naturally me being around a lot of this and seeing a lot of this, a lot of my friends, a lot of the kids that I was raised with, their fathers were involved. Naturally, they had daughters. They didn't want me in their house too much because they were afraid I would put their business in their wives' laps and their daughters' and they felt that...they didn't think that I was doing anything but they didn't want me around because they felt that I would put them in a bad light, you know. But I didn't realize this until later on in life. It kind of...it kind of hampered me from going as far as I would have liked to have gone because I always...it gave me the feeling that I was being resented...I wasn't accepted, you know.

JW: I was under the impression that there weren't that many Black women involved in prostitution. That most of the prostitutes were White.

WB: Are you kidding? Who gave you that impression?

JW: I won't say.

WB: Are you kidding? (Chuckle) Wherever you find any seaport town. I don't give a damn what seaport town you go into, anytime you run into a seaport town, there gon' be some Black prostitutes. And then it's gon' be as many as the police will allow. And there was as many as you wanted. See, you had the...you had districts. You know, they had the Fillmore District, they had the Mission District, they had...they didn't have none over in the Marina. They didn't have any over in the Marina. You had the North Beach area. You had...

JW: Tenderloin.

WB: Tenderloin, and you had the Third and Townsend. Plenty of prostitutes. Plenty of them. And when I say plenty, I do mean plenty. I used to...when I was [unintelligible], I used to go around and see them in action. Then you had the Pacific area. What do you call it? Pacific Street. Always. A seaport town always has plenty of prostitutes.

JW: Are these women still around, some of them?

WB: What do you mean, from 1906?

JW: Well, from 19...whenever you were around.

WB: I'm seventy years old. Now how many prostitutes do you know that live that long? Unless they...unless they turn square and get married. But if they are prostitutes do you know living? None. (Chuckle) You can rack that up. You think I'm kidding, you go down there in the Tenderloin and walk them streets. You ain't going to see none of them down there working. Not at this age.

JW: I don't mean working. I just mean, you know, people who were once in the business and now...

WB: No, no, no. No, you see, that's a...that's a...that's a migrating business. You stay in it until you can't function. Then you go on...old folks...a lot of them do that are fortunate enough to stay around until they can't make it, then they get married and settle down to life, then move to another town. Nobody ever knows what's happening. They move to another town, you know, and if they run into somebody that knows them, the person that knows them never brings it up because he or she could care less, you know, so they are never exposed. No, I can say, I've been here...I can say that I haven't run into any of the sporting women. Well, you have to remember, you see, when I was young and chasing women, all the sporting women were older than I was. So at my age...at seventy, they'd have to be eighty and ninety and you don't find too many of them kind of people in the directory. Not at that age. So they aren't...I would say, there aren't any that I knew. Not any.

JW: Do you consider yourself a religious person?

WB: No.

JW: Do you go to church?

WB: Occasionally.

JW: Are you Catholic?

WB: Yep.

JW: But you weren't raised Catholic.

WB: Yep. I was born a Catholic. I was partly raised a Catholic. I went to Catholic school when I was in the primary grades.

JW: I thought your mother was a Methodist.

WB: My mother is a Methodist. My mother died a...a shouting and hollering...what do you call them?

JW: Pentecostal?

WB: Yes. That's what she was. She loved religion. She loved the church. She loved the church. And the Pentecostal church offered her what she liked. She spent most of her time in the Pentecostal church.

JW: Even when you were a child?

WB: No. No, when I was a child, I spent most of my time at Bethel A.M.E. But that's...

JW: Methodist.

WB: Methodist. I spent most of my childhood in the Methodist church.

JW: Was your mother a member at the same time?

WB: My mother was going to the church at the same time when she could. Sometimes she worked and she couldn't make it to church, but as often as she could, she made it to church.

JW: So she made the switch over to Pentecostal later on.

WB: Oh, way after I was grown and became a man. That's how I met my first wife through her and the Pentecostal church. My wife was born Catholic. She went to the Pentecostal church, and my mother met her and thought she was a wonderful woman and introduced her to me and that was part of my education in life.

JW: What do you think of the contribution that the church makes to the community or does it make a contribution?

WB: The church, a church or all churches?

JW: Churches in general.

WB: I think it contributes an awful lot to the community. Any community that a church is in. I think if the community works wholeheartedly with the church, I think the community prospers. There's less crime in the community if the community works with the church. I believe that churches are necessary. Wouldn't you

WB: say it's a necessary...I don't want to say a necessary evil, but I should say the church is necessary. Let's put it that way.

JW: What about the...What was the quality of the ministers in the Black community in the Twenties and Thirties?

WB: Before I answer that, how do you mean that?

JW: What kind of...how do you evaluate them? Were they fine, upstanding men or what?

WB: I could answer that question, but I don't know if you would want it on tape or not. (Chuckle) They were standing up all right. (Chuckle) They were something else. Well, let's put it this way. Now, how long have you been here?

JW: Four and a half years.

WB: Huh?

JW: Just four and a half years.

WB: Did you ever hear about Rev. Hughes?

JW: No. I've heard of Byers and Father Wallace and Haynes.

WB: Haynes.

JW: And quite a few others.

WB: Have you heard about McGruder?

JW: Yes.

WB: Did they ever tell you about him?

JW: Well, I want to get your opinion.

WB: Well, I'm just like the rest of them. I feel just the same way because I happen to know more than a lot of people did about some of them, but I was in a better position to find out a little more, but they are just like you...just like they told you. That's just the way they were. They were...some of them were rascals now.

JW: They weren't practicing what they preached?

WB: Well, I don't know what they were preaching, but they...what they were practicing wasn't in the Bible. Let's put it that way. (Chuckle) I guess you have to...they...it's...I guess it's a thing that happens throughout the country...throughout the United States. I don't know about the foreign countries, but I think it's a thing that happens throughout the United States. Ministers become involved in community work. Most of them, I think, are sincere. Most of them, they are. I think they are sincere. When they go into it, they are sincere. But some of these women aren't too sincere, you know. The body is weak. Let's put it that way. And they cause a lot of these ministers to do a lot of things they don't intend to do. You know, they ...the women put themselves in a position. It's like saying, "Well, who am I to say no," you know.

JW: What caused you to convert to Catholicism?

WB: What?

JW: When did you decide to leave Bethel A.M.E. and become a Catholic?

WB: M-m-m-m. Well, I...I never...After my...after my first marriage I kind of halfway went Catholic, but not...'cause she was Catholic and I went to the Catholic church with her. But then she...

JW: Wait a minute. I thought...wait a minute...I thought you met her in a Pentecostal church.

WB: No, no. I didn't say I met her in the church. I said she was with my mother. She was one of the...what do you call them? One of the...one of the...one of the people that contribute to the church. What do you call them? I can't think of the name now. The whole group. What do you call them?

JW: Congregation?

WB: The congregation...she was just one of the cong...one of the members. That's what I wanted to say. She was one of the members of the Pentecost church. My mother was a member of the Pentecost church.

JW: But your mother and she were both Catholic at the same time?

WB: No, no. My mother, she...my first wife was a Catholic, born and raised a Catholic. She was born...I forgot...some place in Louisiana. She was raised. She was French. She was half... she had a lot of Creole, you know. She spoke a lot of French. She was natural...she was naturally a Catholic, but some...

WB: there was something about her and religion and God and belief in the Bible. She went to Pentecost. She got involved in that because I think she got involved with the minister and all that. All that was involved, and she got involved, but she was always a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic. But she...what do you call it?... she wandered from religion to religion. When she died, she died a Catholic, but she was strong with the Seventh Day Adventist. She was definitely in strong with the Seventh Day Adventist because that's when we...that's when we got our divorce...during her Seventh Day Adventist career.

JW: Well, while we are on the subject, her name was Marie Sims?

WB: Yes.

JW: And you met her through your mother?

WB: Yes.

JW: And how old were you at the time then?

WB: I was about twenty-four, maybe.

JW: You mean she was older than you were?

WB: No. Maybe a year or two younger...two years, I think, younger than I was.

JW: And what was it that impressed you about her?

WB: She was attractive and she was tall. She was well-built. And she had ideas on me more or less, and she just placed herself in a position for me to make contact with her, that's all. And I did and got involved.

JW: What was her background? She was raised in Louisiana. Was her family farmers?

WB: No, her mother did...what do you call it? She worked in the home ...you know, worked for a lady in a home or something. She did the same thing when she was in New Orleans, when she was in Louisiana. That's the best I can give you for her background. I think she got in with a family...she got in with a family that traveled to Europe and around Europe she got in with this family and they helped educate her and taught her French, what little she knew. She had to learn French, because her mother couldn't speak nothing but French. Her mother couldn't speak a thing but French. So it was necessary for her to learn French

WB: so she could communicate with her mother. But she got her experience working doing housework or maid work.

JW: Her father was French?

WB: No, no. I don't know nothing about her father. She didn't have too much to say about her father because I think her father and her mother separated when she was young.

JW: And did she have a high school education?

WB: No. I'm pretty sure she didn't. She took cosmetology but she didn't have to have a high school education to get into that.

JW: What age was she when she came to California?

WB: I don't know.

JW: Had she been out here for a long time before you met her?

WB: Oh, I don't know. I know her past experience from what I have heard of her past experiences. She may have been here ten years before I met her.

JW: Oh, so she was relatively young when she came. A teenager.

WB: Yes. Something like that.

JW: How long did you court her before you got married?

WB: Maybe a year and a half.

JW: How did your mother and father react to [unintelligible]?

WB: [Unintelligible]

JW: [Unintelligible]

WB: Why didn't he think too much of her? Because she had a little background and he was familiar with it.

JW: What do you mean?

WB: You mean, how did he know it?

JW: No. What do you mean by background? Everybody's got a background.

WB: Yeah, but she had a background that he didn't approve of, you know. Too many associates.

JW: And you were married for...all the way...you got married in what? About '38?

WB: No. '36, I think.

JW: And you stayed married all the way through the War?

WB: Yes. I stayed married until after the War.

JW: What caused your divorce?

WB: Well, as far as I can see, from what I can see, it was the stay in the Army. My stay in the Army, plus her freedom, you know... her freedom after I was...When I came back, she was all right when I came back, for a while but then she got involved and her involvement didn't include me. So, and so...and I wasn't too much in favor of coping with it or trying to solve it, anyway. Probably if I had went about it a different way, I probably could have, you know, solved it, but I wouldn't have solved her attitude. I mean as far as her...she got...that's something she'd have to take care of herself. She'd have to see the light herself. I couldn't have done anything about that. But whatever happened, it happened for the best. I mean, it was better for both of us because I'd a had to...let's see, I think it was two or three years after we...I forget what it is...two or three or four years after we divorced, she died.

JW: She died relatively...real young then.

WB: Yes. When you say real young, let's see, I was about thirty or thirty-one.

JW: That's young.

WB: Yes, considering, it is.

JW: What did she die of?

WB: I think she died of cancer.

JW: But she had remarried after she married you?

WB: She remarried. Now this is the understanding because her husband was a service...a soldier, and then I think they contacted him after her death and he came over. I met him through some friends of his or friends of hers, and he was trying to get some information

WB: from me about it, but I couldn't give him any information because I knew less about it than he did and he didn't know a damn thing about it, and he was married to her. I told him I couldn't help him. All I know I was married to her but obligation...I think she died with a little money. When I say little money, she maybe had four or five thousand dollars, but I think... See, when she got ill, she was in the hospital for quite a while and I think she had...I think that cancer had got to her when she had delirious moments and there was nothing they could do for her. I think she willed all...all her worldly belongings to the church. She died a Catholic incidentally.

JW: Did she...did you have children?

WB: No. I had a daughter, but not by my wife though...an illegitimate daughter.

JW: Was this before you married or after?

WB: Before I was married.

JW: Is that daughter still living?

WB: No, she died. That's her up there.

JW: Did you have contact with her while she was coming up?

WB: Mostly. In fact, she lived with me for the last...she lived with me right after she got out of high school. She lived with me for about three or four years, and then she decided she wanted to live by herself, and that's when she had her problems.

JW: What?

WB: She had a...she had a leaky blood vessel in her brain, and she went into a coma once at the house and she came out of it. The doctor told her that, you know, it might happen again and it might not. Said you have to take this chance; said but if I were you, I'd have it operated on and then you won't have to take no chances. You'll be rid of it for the rest of your life. You'll be in good condition. But he had to shave her head. I think she didn't want that. She didn't want that operation. But you see, I can't really...I really blame myself to a point because I didn't push it too hard. After she said no, she didn't want no operation, I didn't push but I think if I had heckled her a little bit, I think she would have went on and had the operation. And that's what she died of. The blood vessel in her brain broke. She went into a coma for about forty days and never came out of it.

JW: What was her name?

WB: Evelyn.

JW: Did she take the name Brooks?

WB: She started to and she did it for a while, and then she put... went back to her stepfather's name, Lawson. The reason she didn't really completely go into it is because that meant that on her job she would have to go through a whole lot of paper signing and a whole lot of...she had a pretty good paying job with the government and she didn't want to go through all of that, so she said no.

JW: When did you meet your present wife?

WB: Oh, I knew her in 1932 when she was first here. I knew her, but I didn't go around with her. I knew her, but I didn't go around with her. I didn't go around with her until after she came out here in 1946, I think.

JW: What was her maiden name?

WB: You mean, before she got married?

JW: Before she married you.

WB: Kiner. That's her first married name.

JW: What?

WB: Kiner.

JW: How do you spell that?

WB: K-i-n-e-r.

JW: So she was married at the time you met her?

WB: No, she was a widow.

JW: Okay. Well, fill me in. She came out here...she was born in Culpepper, Virginia?

WB: That's right.

JW: And she grew up in Boston?

WB: That's right.

JW: And then she came to California off and on to visit her aunt?

WB: That's right.

JW: And she got...When did she get married?

WB: When she went back. She came out here in '32, I think she came out here. She stayed a year or eighteen months or something like that, and when she went back to Virginia, to Boston, she got married. She stayed in Boston until her husband died. Then she came back out here.

JW: When did you start courting her?

WB: What?

JW: When did you start courting her?

WB: In '47.

JW: And how long did...So you had only been divorced for about two or three years?

WB: I wasn't divorced when we were going together. I wasn't divorced.

JW: Did people say anything about that?

WB: What?

JW: Did people say anything about that?

WB: We were separated but we weren't divorced. She was the one pushed the divorce. If she hadn't pushed it, I wouldn't have gotten a divorce. But my wife didn't push it. She didn't want a divorce. But it kind of hampered my field of...my field of women, you know, by being tied up with her. So I had to get a divorce. So I got a divorce.

JW: And when did you get married for the second time?

WB: Twenty-five from seventy-nine is what? Fifty-four?

JW: Yes.

WB: That's when I got married.

JW: Your wife...what was her maiden name before? Before she was Kiner, she was what?

WB: Damn. I've forgotten now. Lindsey, I think.

JW: What?

WB: Lindsey, I think.

JW: Did she go to college?

WB: I don't think so.

JW: What was her occupational background before you married her?

WB: Well, I don't...As far as I know, before she got married, she used to do like the women do now. You know, at that time, that's all women could was housework. What do you call it?

JW: Domestic work.

WB: What? Domestic work. That's what she did.

JW: I thought she worked at Metropolitan for a while.

WB: She worked at Metropolitan when she came here, when she first came here in '46. That's where she worked. Before she came here, I think she worked...when she was first married during the War when she was with her husband, I think she was working on the elevator in Boston.

JW: Did you have anything to do with her getting on at Metropolitan?

WB: Nope.

JW: Were you working in the same building?

WB: Yep.

JW: That was convenient.

WB: What?

JW: I said, that was convenient.

WB: Well, having known her before, we kind of re...you know, we got reacquainted and we kind of talked old times but then...then I was more or less...we were both available. You know, she was a widow, and I was single or practically single, so we just started to go around together.

JW: How long have you been retired now?

WB: Five years.

JW: And do you like it?

WB: Oh, it should have been twenty years ago. It's the life. I love it.

JW: Is your health...has your health been good since you retired?

WB: Oh, so-so. I had a little diabetes, a little case of diabetes, and I had a stroke or two. Nothing...nothing out of this world, you know.

JW: Well, sometimes people say if you retire, a lot of times your health gets real bad right after.

WB: Mine hasn't gotten any worse.

JW: Not worse.

WB: I don't think so. Blood pressure went up a couple of times, but I took care of that.

JW: Well, in conclusion, what would say are the major changes...the biggest changes you've seen, oh, in the last fifty years in terms of Black people in California?

WB: Oh, let's see, now. That's going to be a little hard for me to...to evaluate. Well, one thing that I notice that Blacks have...I don't know, I think it's because of the number that Blacks are more involved in crime, and there is more homosexuality. And I also contribute that to numbers.

JW: You mean when you were a young man coming up, you didn't...

WB: Coming up, you didn't...coming up...little crime amongst Blacks, you know. One Black whip up another one, or go upside his head, or something like that, but as far as touching...fooling with Whites, they didn't bother the White people. But now, them Blacks is beating up the Whites and other Blacks too. Anybody. Chinese, Japanese...anybody. As long as he thinks he can get a little something to buy some dope with. But other than that, let's see. Oh, yes. In numbers, there are more Blacks walking around. You see more now, and jobs are more available to Blacks if they...I mean if they can qualify, they can get the work. I don't think it's race. To my mind, it isn't a case of color. It's a case of whether you can produce or not. A lot of these

WB: Blacks want to go on these jobs and they want to start at the top and don't have the ability. They don't have the qualifications. And when you tell them, no, the first thing they say is discrimination, and that's not fair. If you can qualify and you can do the job, I think you qualified for it, I think the man will give you a chance. At least they will give you a chance. This is my thinking, and I found them to be fair.

JW: What about Black people's attitudes and image of themselves? Has that changed?

WB: The only thing...the only thing I find about Blacks is in the school system. I don't appreciate the parents' attitude with the children in reference to teachers in schools. Now this I don't approve of. Parents, the parents are ready to defend their children regardless. This isn't right. So I think that they should take into consideration them kids lie like hell, and them kids build up stories. They build up situations in order to put themselves in the light and it's always a reflection on the teachers. Well, I can see why teachers don't want to teach them. In some of these schools, that are predominantly Black, they stand to get their throats cut or get their brains knocked out. No, this isn't right.

JW: Well, I think we'll close for today.

WB: For today? You mean there will be no more days, I hope.

JW: (Chuckle) You hope.

END